

Community as a Participatory Foundation in Culturally Conscientious Classrooms

Rebecca M. Sánchez

The development of a trusting community of learners is vital for critical, inclusive, culturally conscientious social studies teaching. Critical, community-minded social studies teachers work to create meaningful relationships among their students and with themselves (Nieto, 1999). Understanding how to relate to others in a diverse group is preparatory to developing more complex social relationships as a member of a larger democratic society.

Community as an element of critical praxis infuses learning with the emotional sentiments of care and respect. Furthermore, incorporating student experience and relating to students as individuals is an essential of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1997). This foundation offers students with a supportive and safe network to explore the challenging content topics in the social studies classroom.

All of those involved in the learning process in a classroom setting grow as they become more emotionally connected and vested in the group. Classrooms riddled with intimidation, unequal distribution of power, demeaning attitudes, and monolithic classroom culture impede trust among students and trust of the teacher (Hinchey, 1998).

The classroom community serves as a place where students and teachers can begin to learn together, to disagree with one another, and to examine historical dilemmas, societal inequities and larger problems of significance to the group.

Although establishing classroom community is not a formulaic process, there are many strategies that a teacher can use to create a classroom community. This article highlights 19 strategies for culturally conscientious teaching based on com-

munity and participation. The strategies are geared particularly for the elementary school level.

These strategies are presented both because of their effectiveness at supporting a participatory classroom community based on the lived experiences of the students, and also to serve as professional reminders during a time when the relationship between classroom community and culturally conscientious teaching are being overlooked in favor of standardized and depersonalized education.

Many of the strategies are social studies mini-lessons in and of themselves. Other ideas included contribute to a participatory classroom culture that can become a starting point for exploring additional complex content topics.

1. Be Revealing about Your Own Emotions

Teachers can model self-awareness on all levels and can provide students with space to do the same. Teachers should call attention to their own wide range of emotions. When feelings of anger or disappointment surface the teacher can talk about those feelings. She can also describe how she deals with the wide range of emotions that she feels.

2. Be an Attentive Listener and Teach Students How To Listen Deeply to One Another

Many classrooms are spaces where there is a great deal of talking but very little listening. In participatory classroom communities the teacher takes time to listen to the children. The teacher acts as a model to the students and can teach them how to take time to listen to and respond to one another.

Listening, even to differing opinions, perspectives, and ideas reinforces the idea of listening as an element of democratic participation. Furthermore, listening

deeply to the unique and diverse perspectives from peers in the classroom prepares students to compare multiple historical and contemporary perspectives related to developing content knowledge.

3. Celebrate, Honor, and Respect Student Differences

Offer students time to discuss differences and explore how individual differences impact the classroom and the larger community. Sometimes we don't confront or even address diversity and identity issues in our classrooms. Over time, students may get the impression that talking about difference is taboo. Eventually, silence creates or exacerbates misperceptions, fear, and stereotypes about people who are different.

4. Look for and Applaud Every Student's Giftedness

Use the New Mexico Keresan Pueblo notion of giftedness in the classroom. This American Indian community has a holistic understanding of giftedness. "Giftedness is viewed as a global human quality encompassed by all individuals and manifested through one's contribution to the well-being of the community" (Romero, 1994: p. 39). The value is placed on how individuals relate to and give back to the larger community. In this sense, all students in the classroom can share their individual talents with the class.

5. Respond to Student Work with In-depth, Qualitative Feedback

Teachers can communicate to students about their work with written comments, questions and concerns. Over time students will realize that the teacher values what they are doing. It also shifts the focus of student work back to the student and not merely to a numerical grade or letter assignment. This contributes to students feeling vested in the group.

Rebecca M. Sánchez is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education at the College of Education of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

6. Talk Privately with Students Who Need Redirection

The comments a teacher makes set the tone for the classroom. If a teacher publicly chastises one student, the class as a whole may become reluctant to participate. Avoiding negative language is another way for the teacher to be a role model. Talking privately lets the students know that there are calm and respectful ways of addressing problematic issues.

7. Pay Attention to Classroom Arrangement

Sitting in a large U, in groups facing one another, or in a circle helps to create an environment where students listen to one another. Rows and isolated seating can inhibit student participation and interaction. It is easier to listen, pay attention and participate when the group can look at one another.

8. Communicate with One Another in Writing, with Pictures, and with Other Friendly Types of Correspondence

All too often the only written messages given to students are progress reports, report cards, or informational notes. Offering students personal correspondence lets them know that the teacher values them, regardless of their academic performance.

9. Use and Teach Students To Use Inclusive Language Rather than Exclusive Language

Sometimes we create barriers in our classroom communities by using phrases or expressions that separate students into groups. Students need to feel like they are all in the educational process together. Avoid language or titles that create hierarchical distinctions in the classrooms. Use the word "we" in place of "you" and "I."

10. Have the Students or Their Parents Teach Something about Their History to the Group

When children and their parents become "teachers" their knowledge is valued. This inclusive strategy conveys the message to children that each person has worthwhile experiences and knowledge that is important to the community. Additionally, the students have a way to connect personally to historical events. This strategy also positions the teacher as a learner.

11. Collectively Write a List of Goals, Rules, and Norms for the Classroom Community

What do students value in a classroom space? Help the students articulate their own hopes, dreams, and ideas for their classroom communities. The teacher can be mindful of this list when planning lessons, arranging the classroom, and relating to individual students. This process can be paralleled with a discussion on local, state and federal documents that outline the goals, rules, norms and laws for our society and government.

12. Establish a Time during the Week Where Each Person Can Have an Uninterrupted Amount of Time To Share

Students can be encouraged to share from their own life experiences as a way to understand one another and build community (Ayers, 2001; Christensen, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998b). Furthermore, teachers can also share their own stories to become equal stakeholders in the classroom community.

In order for students to feel like they can take risks during classroom discussions the teacher must also engage herself in the process. In sharing their own life experiences, teachers can avoid being perceived by students as "all knowing, silent interrogators" (hooks, 1994: p.21).

13. Have Class Meetings To Discuss Important Class Issues

The conversation can begin with each person writing a question, concern, or comment that they want to share with the group. The class can then systematically talk through class issues. A further benefit associated with class meetings is that students gain experience in collective problem solving. Throughout the school year the class can conduct their meetings based on different models of democracy such as representative democracy and direct democracy.

14. Use Project-Based Learning

The class community will be strengthened when students and the teacher work on projects that target problems or challenges faced by the larger community. Culturally conscientious teachers attempt to students develop decision making and problem solving skills (Nieto, 1999). Utilizing a problem-based learning schema helps students work collaboratively to develop

and implement projects as a way to solve community problems.

First, students work collectively to determine a list of problems. The students formulate questions related to the problem. They then research the problem and collect and analyze information. The fourth step requires the students to develop proposals for solving the problem based on their research. Finally, the students implement the solution plan.¹

A benefit of project-based learning is that the strengths of individual students can be incorporated into the larger community oriented project, thus increasing participation. Project based learning also encourages students to become involved in their own diverse communities and they learn how to become participants in recognizing and addressing the challenges faced by diverse groups.

15. Develop Authentic, Engaging, and Pertinent Lessons

Students should feel like what they are learning at school really matters and relates to the global community. When contrasted with current educational trends which include using prepared programs and materials which often contain scripted or rigid lessons, and the added pressures of the NCLB act this suggestion is a timely professional reminder.

The teacher must use the energy and curiosity of the students to drive classroom instruction (Christensen, 1994). Focusing on lesson development is one responsive technique to planning based on the needs and interests of the students.

When the students are considered in the planning process the community is strengthened because the students see that their participation and input impacts the curriculum and instruction for the class. Developing authentic lessons based on the needs of the students is a culturally conscientious strategy and it also touches on citizenship education (Risinger, 2006).

16. Give Students Choices in Their Assignments

Choice invites the students to actively explore the self while simultaneously studying the content; this is a way to increase participation while at the same time remaining culturally conscientious because the individual is valued. Offering choices allows students to explore their interests and increases the likelihood that they will see their work through to completion.

Choice is another way that students

will work together and learn about each other. A further advantage of offering choices is that students have the opportunity to think critically, compare and contrast options, and weigh responsibilities and consequences. These skills are essential in a democratic society.

17. Relate Content Area Topics to the World, National, Regional, Local, and Classroom Community

Connecting concepts and skills to the community is another way for students to find relevance in their work and become active in the learning process of their own classroom. It is important for students to understand that what they are learning is related to the larger society. Relating content topics to the greater community is another way for the students' own cultural communities to be incorporated into the content.

18. Decorate the Room with an Assortment of Student Work

Forget about purchasing classroom decorations and posters. Student work and student created materials are far more interesting to look at. When posting student work, don't overemphasize the 100% papers. Think of other ways to showcase the diversity of student work. My third grade students loved it when they got to select their own work for display. This gave them first hand experience at impacting the aesthetic of our community.

When students see their work posted around the room it encourages them to take pride in what they are doing. It is also an interesting way for students to share with one another. Showcasing student work creates an attractive and welcoming community space for the students. They will care about protecting and maintaining an attractive classroom space. Protecting and maintaining the physical environment is another essential for participatory citizenship in a democracy.

19. Offer Opportunities for Students To Get To Know Each Other through Their Work

Making time for students to share and read their work aloud is a strategy that facilitates community (Shor, 1996). The act of voicing brings value, attention, courage and care to students' written word. These alternative texts also have the potential to become material for critical reflection, critical analysis, and critical action by the students (Hinchey, 1998; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998a).

A Participatory Classroom Community

Classroom communities offer social studies teachers a way to practice many of the ideals associated with both culturally relevant pedagogy and democratic education. The challenge is to model the very characteristics and principles we are studying in the classroom.

As teachers we must be mindful about our practice and we must work to incorporate participatory process, activities and content events into classroom life. A participatory classroom community prepares students for the larger conversations associated with the social studies and with community membership.

Culturally conscientious educators recognize the significance of classroom community and participatory and meaningful relationships. The ideas presented in this article describe some of the ways that a teacher can get to know her students and some strategies for the students to get to know one another.

Note

¹ The project-based learning process described has been developed by Dr. Quincy Spurlin of the University of New Mexico.

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